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Homestead

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Homestead · *Michael Mott*

I

I woke to the strong smell of skunk, something under the floorboards, and took up my troubled thoughts where I'd left them, the feeling these fields wouldn't pay back taxes, the too few students—those who cancelled at the last moment, those who never wrote or came.

Something was slipping away from us, little by little, with no one to stop it, no single idea to hold back the developers, who had ideas of their own. It looked like the last chance on the clockface.

Mice skirmishing the trash in the kitchen, two screech owls far off in the woods. I opened a window, not knowing whether the skunk smell would rush in after me or be diminished by that. It seemed better.

The house was full of presences, mostly good ones, so much living had gone into the wood, so many worriers there before me, less those workers who hadn't anything left at the end of a day to fret with. The wind came up the meadow. Something distanced the creeks. One lightning bug looped the loop past the windows. Whatever was doomed didn't know it.

It's an old story, maybe. And who'd sat up all night with the bug-lamps putting poultices on the throat of a burning child? Who'd added up the price of seed corn on the back of an envelope? Who'd wanted things with an ache? I wasn't counting my company. What comforts the teething or the dying out of an old house creaking, easing itself on the wind? Prayers,

promises, voices, I.O.U.s—an old story, dispelled, somewhat, by the breeze in any crib made by hands that can't hold forever. No, we never said we could either, only thought it, a bit of faith and a lot more pig-headedness. Run for the Granny woman, tell the preacher we've got something we held back to tell him. What's left us but a mess of weeds and the same words? Nobody liked the moral much either, so much sorrow and joy going into the good wood, going.

II

No, that isn't it either, or it's only a part of it. Tonight reading Pliny in the old house—so many wonders, so many marvels! The white nights of moths, punctuation of wings.

So many smells, ploughland, the perfumed earth, setting each flower apart, or counting the grasses; aftertaste and deep strangeness of wine, old Falernian, scuppernong, muscadine.

All the earthworm turns over, a powder of wood along sills under the holes of post-beetles, the scraping of paper-wasps, doorhandles, the back of a chair, so many wonders—

what I leave of me holding the book too hard, my heels lightly drumming the floorboards, beat of those wings, all the burning going into the eyes, a bruising of surfaces.

I sink deeper into dark waters by night than those waterlilies Pliny talks of on the Euphrates, to float up by day out of nowhere, a face from the floor of dreams, the sunboat of Ra.

III

Maps, tracks across oilcloth, hours pass, the wind turns pages, the book forgotten, what I read there nothing, except where it recalls certain moments or certain sensations—dormant seed in the forest floor.

Thomas Browne, Pliny, Virgil, poet of exiles, all the things men hold to in those dark hours before dawn, the necessary dark, the quiet of the Moon, *Silente luna*, old Roman in the mountains of Rabun, a ritual of taxes, tithes, troubles, the tick tack of an insect.

IV

But we were the uprooted anyway. Weren't we always in exile,
with England in the map of the mind growing smaller and smaller,
or Scotland, or Ireland—Wales, Denmark, Germany—wherever
there were hearths, fields to be deserted, gray cities by estuaries?

It wasn't the mothers of North Europe, was it, who wanted
their children, those restless sons, always about them?

Wild geese, wanderers, with irreconcilable ideas, religions,
we came, we saw, we were conquered, an old tale, and the
land lust led us astray, our possessions possessed us,
we carried the lumber of Europe to one breakdown place after
another, one hollow, one dry creekbed, one dusty arroyo.

When the books spilled down the hill a small bird watched us.
When the mice got the sheet music we were fast asleep.
When a dog bark parted the night I considered my hands.

V

I have made a start after all. I have accepted the tilt of this table,
having moved it from floorboard to floorboard. I have mended my writing
as a plough follows the contours of a hill. "Geography dictates" even
in small things. That's it, of course, a lesson that seemed worth learning—
where the grain goes. There appeared little point in deciding whether the water
shaped the rock or the rock sculptured the water. It was all one, a flowing
in certain rockpools, a perfect marriage. It was not a matter of compromise either.
Earth doesn't bother with terms like the Who-were-they?—Indians? Only a slim
line I hold onto and dare not drop: furrow, grain, contour, thread, cardinal line.
Or say rather I have given myself over at last to the wood, a simple ceremony.

Invaders, intruders resentful of later intruders. And what after all, is a "homestead"? Something in place of a home? Maybe. Some Government grant to the homeless and landless out of the lands of others, some yellowing title-deed, to be seen, ironically enough under glass in the Cherokee Museum, giving this horizontal and that, looking neat as a piece of a quilt, to the tune of so many acres, and earned over so many years of labor by Godfearing, after a fashion, and, certainly, white, people, having a say and a vote, and then, Feudal after the fact, having the right and the duty to bear arms in battle in defense of the homestead.

Thomas Hopper, you who got lost somewhere in the war, the only war that matters, the one that divides the heart and the heartland. Sam Hopper, you who shaped the poplar beams of the ark riding the night, what you left keeps the same distance between creeks, is weathertight still and upright. Thomas Hopper, still lost.

And you who planted the goose plum should know it bears fruit in odd years, only leaves in even. Likewise, the garden walled with stones like a stockade gives us wild garlic and fleabane. The creek nearest the cabin is full of watercress, all stalks.

Left to himself in winter, the ratsnake under the floorboards feeds off the last ears of Indian corn and keeps down mice that revive miraculously, perhaps by spontaneous generation out of dustdevils, lint, hairpins that fell through the cracks, to multiply each summer the snake is scared off, intruded on.

VII

God of Thunder, rumble of storms, rumble of rockers, stray rifle shots—
Joe Pie Weed, or Queen of the Meadow, lashes the windowpanes
with the rain. I sit long awake smoking, listening for messages
not meant for me, returned “Addressee Unknown,” “Try a different
mountain.” Before the storm, dust made a moonscape of the laurel
you called “ivy” along roads. When I close my eyes I am walking
the creekbed colored with yellow butterflies. The long war goes on.
Strangers to ourselves, we turn upon strangers. The weeds rise again
to the windows, livid horsemen of lightning with a smear of purple.

Only the company of the dead is tamed of all violence. We can still
wrap you up like old letters, send you back in the wood, or we think
we can. So, we’re doing fine, just fine, only help us to hold on,
hold on to these fields, these weathered boards, these man marks
you made for yourselves, or unknowingly. Keep faith with the floundering.
Walk back through the wet, tall weeds in the mists of the morning.
From your wars, or whatever, return. Give us the title cleared, the deed intact.

Hopper House
Summer, 1978

1978 Michael Mott